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ABSTRACT

The governmental process entails a great deal of talk and writing. Much political language is informal, and some is official. In either case, its linguistic categorizations shape perceptions and feelings about problematic and controversial public issues, reflecting and playing upon the ambivalence and changing perspectives of all who are involved. Categorization can engender cognitions that are dogmatic or tentative; perceptions of inhuman enemies or of adversaries that can best be handled through the seeking out of dissonant information; sensations that are perceived as factual propositions; beliefs that are unconsciously taken for granted; and facts that are reconstructed into different facts. Such evocations follow consistent rules of cognitive structuring, only some of which can be specified. They engender simular patterns of perception and similar tactics in recurring political situations. (Author/LL)

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THE CREATION OF POLITICAL BELIEFS

THROUGH CATEGORIZATION

Murray Edelman

February 1975

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ABSTRACT

The governmental process entails a great deal of talk and writing, whatever else it entails. Much political language is informal, and some of it is official. In either case its linguistic categorizations shape perceptions and feelings about problematic and controversial public issues, reflecting and playing upon the ambivalence and changing perspectives of all who are involved.

Categorization can engender cognitions that are dogmatic or tentative; perceptions of inhuman enemies or of adversaries that can best be handled through the seeking out of dissonant information; sensations that are perceived as factual propositions; beliefs that are unconsciously taken for granted; and facts that are reconstructed into different facts. Such evocations follow consistent rules of cognitive structuring, only some of which we can specify. They engender similar patterns of perception and similar tactics in recurring political situations.

THE CREATION OF POLITICAL BELIEFS THROUGH CATEGORIZATION

Linguistic forms and psychological processes can evoke political perceptions and beliefs that are not based upon observations of the world, that are inconsistent with each other, and that change with new symbolic associations. Nonempirically based political cognitions are common and form recurring patterns. They are hardly consistent, however, with the commonsense view: that the world is the same for every sane observer and that individuals independently perceive this world in a relatively stable and logically consistent way. Perceptions of the nature of public issues and of what is fact sometimes fluctuate substantially, bringing marked changes in beliefs about the competence and performance of public officials and in beliefs regarding such matters as whether a welfare program is providing adequate, low, or exorbitant benefits, whether unemployment or inflation is likely to improve or get worse, and whether a foreign threat justifies incursions on civil rights or an austerity budget. The same person, moreover, is often ambivalent about such beliefs, changing his views with changes in the company he keeps, in general current views, or in his background reading. A theory of opinion formation can be valid only if it takes account of this dynamic complexity in cognitive structures rather than assuming that change and inconsistency in beliefs and perceptions are exceptional departures from a norm of single-mindedness and stability, readily captured in the response to a survey question.

Because symbolic cues evoke both change and stability in cognitions, the actual frequency or duration of specific perceptions and beliefs during some particular time period is not in itself a significant

theoretical issue. History is replete with instances of large groups of people who remain attached for long periods to invalid beliefs about political issues, authorities, strategies, enemies, and allies, even when information that would correct their misperceptions is available. The pervasiveness throughout recorded history of poverty, mass violence, and misconceived political action and quiescence, and the continual recurrence of analogous misperceptions in similar situations make it clear that evocative political symbolism functions in a patterned way and that the discovery of the patterns is an important goal for social science.

We need to learn just how linguistic forms and political actions contribute to cognitive restructurings that are not empirically based: what possibilities exist and under what conditions they occur. This paper focuses upon the function of language in the process of structuring, basing its tentative conclusions upon forms of change in political beliefs and perceptions that frequently occur and recur.

The following propositions are consistent with political beliefs and behaviors that occur every day:

1. Perceptions and beliefs are frequently based upon something other than objective observations.
2. Such cognitions are based upon language forms; upon the logical postulates incorporated in categorizations, terms, and syntax; and upon shared interpretations of gestures.
3. An individual's beliefs and perceptions are not autonomous, but are reflections of social agreements and controversy, of beliefs taken for granted in a particular social milieu, and of anticipations of other people's reactions.

4. They are therefore frequently different for different people and for the same person at different times.
5. Beliefs so completely taken for granted that they are not consciously recognized, evaluated, or challenged are a major influence upon conscious beliefs.
6. The same person may hold a range of varying, often contradictory, cognitions.
7. Because cognitions may be generated to justify roles and self-concepts, they often reflect anxiety about real or imagined threats.
8. People are therefore often most confident of the validity of beliefs that many others regard as wrong, absurd, or dangerous.

In these respects the world of politics resembles the worlds of religion, of folk myth, and perhaps of dreams more closely than it resembles the aspects of people's lives spent in office and factory work, school, and recreation. It functions in a patterned, systematic way, but the pattern is different from the one we are tempted to assume is there. Political cognitions are readily based upon social suggestion and unconscious motivations for the same reason that religious beliefs are. Both deal almost entirely with "events" that are remote from everyday activities yet are thought to influence the quality of life in critical ways; and both divide believers of different faiths, engendering fears of serious harm from the misguided and the heretical.

The Linguistic Structuring of Perception

The link between language and mind is an exciting scientific frontier, its explored side already yielding important insights for students of politics and its remote side promising more fruitful ones. Like all

metaphors, "link" is partly misleading, for the same phenomena are describable in terms of psychological traits or in terms of linguistic characteristics.[1]

The key idea here, recognized in both the psychological and the linguistic literature, is that perception necessarily involves categorization.[2] To place an object in one class of things rather than another establishes its central characteristics, its connections, and people's assumptions regarding what properties it has other than those directly perceived. Placing a person in the category "welfare official" establishes his role, highlighting some of his activities, anticipating and assuming others we do not see him performing, and discounting or ignoring other actions in which he engages, but that are not part of the welfare official role, even though they may influence his policies in crucial ways. The public cannot observe most actions and potential actions of public officials, and neither can news reporters or others who might publicize them. A large part of the political world consists of perceptions evoked by linguistic categorization.

Another characteristic of the political spectator reinforces the same effect. By definition, he is not involved as an actor whose policies have tangible consequences. It is not feedback about his instrumental success that guides him, but the efficacy of his beliefs in assuaging his anxieties or in raising his hopes. Verbal categorization rather than physical action therefore defines his involvement.

In recent years phenomenologists have brought an enhanced appreciation of the potency of such evocation, especially in ambiguous situations. Maurice Merleau-Ponty points out that just as the gestures of an actor playing Lear present Lear, not the actor, to his audience,

so a term or syntactical structure is the thought it evokes, not a tool for expressing a preexisting thought. In the act of speaking or writing people typically recognize ideas in themselves of which they were not even aware before they were expressed; and in the act of responding to others' language, auditors and readers similarly engender cognitions in themselves, thereby communicating.

> Thought and expression...are simultaneously constituted...The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its. This is what makes communication possible.[3]

The crucial function of language in abstract thought and in conceiving situations other than objects immediately in view is also evident from the behavior of sufferers from aphasia. Aphasia is loss of the ability to express ideas, resulting from brain damage. Aphasic patients cannot make statements about possible situations that do not actually exist, nor speak of situations contrary to fact, nor group objects according to color or other common characteristics when asked to do so. It is only in naming situations or characteristics that they are conceived, communicated, and perceived; and it is because naming also amounts to categorizing and abstracting (which it does not for aphasics) that actors and spectators on the political scene create a large part of that scene that is not observable and that may be nonexistent.

Consider an example that makes it clearer how fundamentally categorizations shape both what we see and what we do not see in the political world. In every state mental hospital there are people, classified as "paranoid schizophrenics," who think they could save the world if they were only heeded. Those who know their categorization

as paranoid schizophrenics naturally perceive something irrational in those patients. But a rather large proportion of the population, especially a great number who hold, or aspire to, high political office, and a great number who are strongly attached to a political ideology, also think they could save the world if they were only heeded. And, judging from the fruits of their efforts over many centuries of recorded history, they are no more likely to be either right or wrong than the "schizophrenics." Most of the population perceives them as irrational if a psychiatrist classifies them as sick but as more competent than the average citizen if they hold high public office.

Political and ideological debate consists very largely of efforts to win acceptance of a particular categorization of an issue in the face of competing efforts in behalf of a different one; but because participants are likely to see it as a dispute either about facts or about individual values, the linguistic (that is, social) basis of perceptions is generally unrecognized and unquestioned. Furthermore, the authoritative status of the source of a categorization makes his definition of the issue more readily acceptable for an ambivalent public called upon to react to an ambiguous situation.

The cognitions inherent in language use are dynamic and complex. Chomsky observes that

> Contemporary research in perception has returned to the investigation of the role of internally represented schemata or models and has begun to elaborate the

> somewhat deeper insight that it is not merely a store of schemata that function in perception but rather a system of fixed rules for generating such schemata.[4]

My earlier analysis of the elaborate cognitive structures regarding social problems engendered by metaphor, metonymy, or syntax dealt with some recurring patterns in the generation of political perceptions. Subtle cues evoke cognitions about the causes of problems like poverty and crime, the competence and adequacy of authorities, the level of merit of those who suffer from the problem, the health of the polity, and the nature of efficacious remedies.[5] But that discussion did not adequately take account either of the dynamic character of the cognitive process or of the sense in which it exemplifies a system of fixed rules. For it is clear that response to competing categorizations of public issues is not random any more than it is stable or static. New cues often bring changed perceptions, ambivalence, or multivalence; but they do not always do so. Adherence to a political belief in the face of counterevidence is at least as common as cognitive change. Studies showing that welfare benefits do not detract from work incentive have not brought massive defections from the belief that they do. Disconfirming evidence does not influence most believers in millenarian movements.[6]

Some categorizations clearly become dominant for a large segment of the public for relatively lengthy time periods, though many continue to be ambivalent about them. In 1933 there was the plainest evidence of strong doubts about the viability of capitalism and constitutional government among a large part of the population, especially the poor and the working class. Franklin Roosevelt's definition of the problem as fundamentally

psychological rather than economic or political in character ("All we have to fear is fear itself.") and his associated gestures connoting optimism and resolution succeeded for the next decade in maintaining the political support of the great majority in the face of continued very high unemployment levels, severe hardships, and periodic economic setbacks of major proportions. In every American war except the Southeast Asian war of the sixties most recruits accepted deprivation and death in spite of manifest doubts that it was necessary, or that sacrifice was equal for all social classes, and in the face of clear evidence that some elites gained money and status from war.

This linguistic-psychological phenomenon has a second kind of systematic consequence; it influences the relative salience of the various public issues competing for attention at the same time.

While the psychological processes involved in the generation of such dominant cognitions are largely obscure, they plainly rely upon an interplay between language and feeling. The evocation of a hopeful future in a population beset by poverty and unemployment was the secret of Roosevelt's rhetorical success, just as the evocation of a foreign devil for a population anxious about its physical security has often generated a dominant belief. The politician or aspirant to leadership who most sensitively plays upon widespread hopes and fears in his linguistic evocations creates a dominant categorization and mode of thought. Such problematic situations recur and are repeatedly dealt with in similar ways. They are not resolved either by accident or by fortuitous political genius, but they manifestly furnish a political opportunity that aspirants for leadership exploit with greater or lesser skill.

A second psychological process seems to operate in generating cognitions about problematic political situations. Ambivalence, dissonance, and cross-pressures in political spectators do not result in compromise among conflicting perceptions but rather in expression of a dominant one for a short or extended time. This outcome is consistent with cognitive dissonance theory, of course. It is doubtless furthered by the circumstance that political spectators are rarely in a position to express anything but a dichotomous choice. They cannot divide their vote in proportion to their ambivalence. They must choose to either accept or defy the draft, to either support a demonstration or fail to do so. The confinement of action to a dichotomous choice obviously further encourages the individual to rationalize his choice through his definition of the situation.

The critical fact is, nonetheless, tha. observers and actors on the political scene constantly show by their actions and their talk that beliefs and perceptions are rarely simple, tidy, or consistent with each other for long. Depending on current social and intellectual associations, news developments, memories, and anticipations of the future, people speak and think at varying levels of abstraction, contradict earlier beliefs, take new views of what is salient or trivial, or return to earlier beliefs. Useful analysis must learn what is systematic about such fluctuation and complexity. Language, in the Chomskyan sense, is a set of rules for generating perceptions of the properties belonging to a category and also other properties compatible with the definition of the situation. To speak or write is to structure the mind of both speaker

and audience so as to sensitize them to possibilities congruent with established perspectives, and to do so subtly, so that those affected are often neither conscious of the structuring nor critical of its premises. An ordinary sentence engenders a far more elaborate structure of beliefs and perceptions than we are aware of expressing, wide-ranging in the scope of its evocations, confining in its maskings, and influencing the acceptability of future information.

So far as political beliefs are concerned, the most potent possibilities almost certainly are visions of the future. The typification of a new leader of a powerful rival country as sympathetic and peace-loving evokes a future marked by detente and cooperation in the two countries' dealings with each other. The depiction of the poor as incompetent and as breeding faster than the meritorious classes, perhaps through a metaphoric reference to rule by illiterate hordes, evokes a future in which the unworthy dominate the virtuous. While such cognitions may dominate a society or a smaller grouping for an extended time, they invariably coexist with inconsistent beliefs and perceptions. The person who expresses fears of the high birth rates of the poor may intermittently perceive them as infusing welcome variety into the national culture or providing necessary manpower for industry and the army. For the politician this common form of problematic and ambiguous situation offers challenge and opportunity. For mass publics it is a recurring stimulus to anxiety or to hope for a course of action that will resolve it.

Only rarely, however, are such evocations original. They are ordinarily an instance of what Alfred Schutz calls "a treasure house of readymade pre-constituted types and characteristics, all socially derived and carrying along an open horizon of explored content."[7] As typifications, they focus upon what is alike among situations categorized in the same way;

but they ignore whatever is unique about an issue, event, or person. Most thinking has to be of this sort, for personal attention to the special characteristics of every situation of concern would obviously require infinitely more time, energy, and skill than any human being has at his disposal. The consequence for political opinion of perceiving typifications that are evoked unconsciously is that most beliefs about public issues, events, and leaders reinforce one or another preestablished social consensus. They are unlikely to take account of the unique and critical features of an issue, though it is those features that render the issue susceptible to effective treatment. We nonetheless feel strongly committed to political beliefs when they justify our actions and the causes we have espoused. That they stem from a "reality" that is socially created rather than empirically testable is therefore an advantage in one sense. It allows people to come to terms with their circumstances, though cognitive structures generated in this way may impede the solution of problems.

Certainty and Tentativeness in Political Perception

It is obvious to anyone who has been interested in public affairs for even a short time that the confidence with which people hold their political beliefs need not be at all related to the validity of those beliefs. Indeed, opinions most others regard as bizarre (the imminent takeover of America by communist subversives; the early nineteenth-century "Know Nothing" belief in imminent takeover by the Pope; the belief in 1964 that a Southeast Asian War would maintain Asia as an ally of the "free world") are likely to be the most firmly held and the least questioned by those who hold them.[8] While we need to learn a great deal more about the conditions of certainty and tentativeness in political opinions, there is a ground for offering some observations on this question.

A person whose success depends upon effectiveness in achieving a tangible objective (solving a math problem, building a boat that floats or a speed car that wins races, supporting his family) has good reason to remain tentative in his conclusions, constantly questioning and testing them--though only for that specific project; for if he does not, he will very likely blunder and will quickly know it.

But opinions about political issues and leaders are only rarely subjected to an unambiguous test. There is usually no trial of the course of action an individual observer favors; and even if it is tried, there are always new conditions, complicating issues, and unintended consequences. In politics it almost always remains possible for a person to believe what his social and psychological needs make him want to believe, as is evident from every set of responses to controversial political developments.

Several characteristics of language that have been identified in the twentieth-century revolutions in linguistic theory and philosophy promote this form of misperception. The first follows from categorization. In naming a public problem or event we see ourselves as simply taking account of observations that other objective observers would make in the same way. Workers who drink to excess or come to work stoned are classed by liberals as in need of therapy and by conservatives as in need of criminal sanctions. The HEW Task Force on Work in America[9] classes them as victims of stultifying work environments, which suggests that both therapy and criminal penalities are useless or worse. Categorization, it seems, is not objective even when based on observation. It reflects the assumptions and feelings of those who use it, and it disseminates

assumptions to a wider public. Belief, perception, and linguistic form become alternative expressions of the structuring of the mind and of social agreement.

It is only the atypical skeptic or the self-conscious researcher who recognizes that the implications of a category are problematic and may well be illusory. This is another way of making the point that in everyday activities we accept language as signific, rarely noticing its symbolic properties. If illusion or misperception were self-evident, it would manifestly no longer exist. That language structures our worlds while seeming only to report them is critical.

Classifications of political ideology furnish one of the more striking examples of this point. In the 1960s, and probably still today for most of the public, Barry Goldwater exemplified "extremist" conservatism and Richard Nixon moderate conservatism in the Republican Party. But from the start to the end of his political career Nixon made it clear that he would drastically curb poverty, welfare, health, and education programs for the lower middle class and the poor, further subsidize large corporations, fight the cold war aggressively, not hesitate to send troops into Asia, and discredit liberal opponents with false charges and dirty tricks. This program included, and went beyond, the right-wing policies Goldwater espoused. The critical difference between Nixon and Goldwater lay in their public labeling and self-labeling as respectively moderate and extremist, not in their public policy discussions or actions.

This classification scheme also generates other cognitions. The "moderate" becomes politically acceptable and the "extremist" becomes

unacceptable as a presidental possibility; but policies at least as extreme as those the extremist stands for become acceptable when adopted by a "moderate." For "extremism" evokes future possibilities that are vague but ominous: an aggressive America making puppets of small foreign states in remote places; erosion of the social security system that helps the middle class; repression and starvation of the poor; militarism. The same policies pursued by a moderate generate different perceptions: protection of the free world from communist conspiracies, protection of the respectable against welfare fraud, sound budgetary practices, and so on. Moderation, radicalism, conservatism, and extremism are themselves symbolically cued to connote different things at different times, though they are commonly perceived as objective positions on a unidimensional scale. Labels for political beliefs reflect and disseminate subjective standards, just as all categorizations of normality, pathology, waywardness, authority, and exceptional merit do. The standards are typically arbitrary, specific to a particular social group, and sometimes unacceptable to other groups.

Some classification schemes focus the mind upon the logical, factual, and discoverable aspects of a situation: upon what is known, what remains to be learned, and the patterns among elements. Statements in the language of mathematics are the polar instance of this form of classification. Here the focus is upon logical relationships rather than upon the anxieties and aspirations associated with political facts and personalities. The terms used by an economist trying to forecast price or employment trends (effective demand, degree of oligopoly, money and credit in circulation, net change in the labor force) approach this pole as well,

challenging the analyst to discover the logical relationships among his concepts but also to ascertain the values of the variables under a range of conditions. In determining these facts the economist is likely to be influenced by something other than the challenge of solving the problem, for he will have concerns about unemployment, inflation, price fixing, and union or management power. But insofar as he experiences himself as a researcher, he is stimulated by the discovery of patterns and their applications. He will consequently remain sensitive to the possibility of error in his logic and in his facts and will build tentativeness into his calculations through such devices as error estimates, rechecks, and a program for revising initial conclusions whenever new evidence or more adequate analyses of links among variables become available to him. Such self-conscious awareness of what he does not know distinguishes the scientist from the dogmatist.

Modern social science and common folklore about the pervasiveness of ego defensiveness in thought almost certainly lead us to underestimate the range of everyday situations in which people employ categorizations that encourage receptivity to conflicting evidence. Whenever contemplated courses of action are expressed in terms that highlight their problematic or indeterminate character, relevant evidence is likely to be welcomed, whether or not it is consistent with other evidence and with tentative conclusions. In these conditions people do not shun cognitive dissonance, but seek it out. And the conditions are fairly common, for if they were not, successful action would obviously be wholly dependent on chance and extremely rare. Peter Sperlich has shown that many people seek out conflicting evidence in the course of deciding how to vote in elections.[10] Manifestly, public officials, professionals, and citizens

do so with respect to where and when to build schools, locate welfare offices and post offices, plan mail delivery systems, and thousands of other choices, none of which are made wholly dispassionately, but which do depend very largely upon the weighing of considerations with conflicting connotations and implications. In the degree to which this is so, both facts and logic are taken as provisional and subject to revision, for that stance obviously offers the only hope of bringing what is "problematic" to a successful resolution.

As the terms that define a problem move from a focus upon logic and facts, which are always in some degree unknown, to a focus upon sensations, tentativeness gives way to certainty: to attachment to conclusions that justify the observer in defining himself and others in ways that justify his beliefs and his behavior. That defense of the self often influences belief and perception is accepted by all schools of personality theory, though the schools differ in their views of the dynamics of the process.

Wittgenstein argues in his later work that language consists of distinct domains, with discourse about sensations compartmentalized from discourse about factual objects. This insight offers a basis for understanding how language and sensation influence each other. According to Wittgenstein, the language for sensations is regularly accepted, by those who use it as well as by those who hear or read it, as discourse about fact. Only through subtle analysis does it become evident that it is impossible to cross the line between the two domains. But because this distinction is not manifest in everyday speech and thought, it would seem evident that people translate political statements reflecting their strong feelings into certainty that their pseudo-

statements about factual matters are accurate. Their audiences make the same mistake, led by verbal and behavioral cues to accept the sensations accompanying particular conclusions as if they were statements of fact.

The phenomenon is pervasive in political discourse for reasons already noted: the fears and hopes governmental actions create and the remoteness from everyday life of the events with which governmental actions purport to deal. Consider some common examples. When someone declares, "The President is destroying political opposition" (or civil rights or constitutional liberties or the free enterprise system), the speaker is expressing his anger at presidential actions or statements he does not like. He is, moreover, doing so in the form of a sentence that purports to describe observable consequences of the President's alleged behavior, that is, to be a factual statement. On hearing it, that part of the population that is displeased with current conditions or with the President and apprehensive about its situation will be inclined to accept the "description" on its own terms. Under these conditions few will or can analyse the demonstrable impact of presidential behavior upon popular liberties or the range of situations in which that form of allegation has been repeatedly made and accepted in the past. Few will recall that the statement is a stock perception of political opponents of every regime; that it was even more commonly employed by opponents of Franklin Roosevelt's welfare, labor, and economic measures in the thirties than by opponents of Richard Nixon during the Watergate investigation.

This form of statement about presidential usurpation is not a factual proposition, though a description of <u>particular</u> deprivations of liberty would of course be factual.

The statement is a cry of alarm and concern; that is, it expresses sensations. Those who feel the same sensations when their attention is directed to the President will be inclined to accept the statement as a factual description, for both the author and this segment of his audience rationalize their feelings in this way, thereby reinforcing the sensations. Those who feel no such concern about the President's actions will be skeptical of the statement, writing it off as alarmist or as political rhetoric. Most people will probably have both reactions to some degree, the statement reinforcing their ambivalence but making them more susceptible to anxiety in the future. Whatever its effect on a particular audience, such a statement employs the <u>form</u> of a factual observation about politics while saying nothing about facts.

A great many statements about politics arouse anxiety or hope in this way, purporting to convey information while not doing so, yet leaving the impression that they do. This linguistic form accounts for most of the passion the political scene evokes.

These are common political examples of such signals of feeling:

We are establishing a Thousand Year Reich [or the most far reaching reforms since the Republic began].

The Party will end unfair working conditions and exploitation of labor.

Criminals need rehabilitation, not punishment.

Moral confusion, not economics, is the fundamental problem today.

The government is creating a climate that discourages economic progress.

When statements are expressions of feeling masquerading as fact, they mask the need for verification and engender uncritical belief in pseudo-facts.

Dogmatic attachment to a political belief need not mean that the belief will be stable or long-lasting or that inconsistent cognitions are not held concurrently. The committed communist who becomes an equally committed anticommunist is a recurrent phenomenon; either belief evidently serves the same function for the personality. The exponent of the view that capitalism creates poverty who also believes that the poor bring their troubles on themselves is also common; his diverse cognitions occupy different realities, each brought to the fore by a range of associations: linguistic cues, social ties, or governmental actions.

The Categorization of Enemies

The definition of enemies can be an especially important special case of the confusion of fact and feeling because it often engenders political support for merciless treatment of other people, who come to be perceived as evil or irrational threats to society requiring ruthless eradication.

In his study of the Kent State shootings James Michener reported that "the mother of two Ohio college students advocated firing on students even for minor practices, such as going barefoot and wearing long hair."[11] There is often extreme punitiveness toward such victimless crimes as unlawful sex practices and any use of drugs. The torture of political prisoners in many countries, the occasional beating of political protesters while arresting them virtually everywhere, and the enthusiastic support for these practices by a part of the population call for explanation.

So do other manifestations of the same phenomenon that may not at first seem quite of the same order, but only because a larger proportion

of the population share the perception and therefore do not as readily recognize an obsessive perspective for what it is. Fear or revulsion toward the poor, foreign-born, and nonwhite is manifestly close to the surface for many, and it grows especially intense when such people behave unconventionally. In these circumstances there is widespread support for restrictions upon their autonomy that are strongly punitive in impact though often defined as "help," and often support for incarceration.

There is reason to suspect that the very depiction of people as of low status unconsciously encourages the perception that they are threats to society. Theodore Sarbin declares that the word "dangerous" "seems to have been shaped out of linguistic roots that signified relative position in a social structure."

> Those persons or groups that threaten the existing power structure are dangerous. In any historical period, to identify an individual whose status is that of a member of the "dangerous classes,"...the label "criminal" has been handy.... The construct, criminal, is not used to classify the performers of all legally defined delicts, only those whose position in the social structure qualifies them for membership in the dangerous classes.[12]

If the ideas of criminality and poverty are associated linguistically, they are far more obviously associated in the definition and punishment of crime, lending support to Sarbin's point. While white-collar crime (price fixing, embezzlement, illegal trade practices) is widely regarded as an understandable extension of normal business practice, hardly "dangerous," and therefore rarely penalized severely, the crimes of the poor (larceny, assault) are widely regarded as evidence of inherent dangerousness and far more severely penalized, though they manifestly

hurt only a small fraction of the number of people injured by white-collar crime and in most instances hurt their victims far less severely.

There are several striking characteristics of all the "enemies" who engender such intense emotion and punitiveness. First, they are not perceived as enemies at all by a large part of the population, usually a majority; and the very fact that their definition is controversial seems to intensify the fears of those who do perceive them as threats, for their rationality is at stake; belief in the reality of this enemy becomes the test of their credibility and the touchstone of their self-esteem. Second, the group defined as the enemy is a relatively powerless segment of the population and often a small minority. Third, the enemies are perceived as achieving harm through covert activity. They may look like students, businessmen, or ordinary political dissenters, but are really engaged in secret subversion. To categorize them as doing evil covertly is to ignore their visible human qualities, to treat them as inherently nonhuman, and to advocate their ruthless eradication.

This mode of definition can be better understood if it is contrasted with the political definition and perception of ordinary adversaries. An opposition engaging in visible tactics calls for tactical and strategic countermoves, not repression. The opponent's talent for planning and his susceptibility to error are taken into account as best they can be, each side trying to see the situation from the other's perspective in order to better anticipate its strategy. It is the perception of the opponent

as human, with a human being's propensity for calculation and for error, that explains attitudes and actions in such confrontations. But the evocation of an invisible entity who, acting covertly, has brought about evil things and threatens worse in the future, is based upon defining him as inhuman and uncanny (to borrow Freud's word for a similar form of perception). It is accordingly impossible to see from his perspective or to put oneself in his place. It is also impossible to engage in any form of "game playing" with him, whether it involves bargaining or the mutual resort to strategic force. Only ruthless repression can bring salvation.

To this point I have examined these contrasting postures in terms of their psychological characteristics: perception, strategic calculation, expectation, role taking, and feeling. The postures can also be understood as expressions of linguistic categorizations. In the one case the opponent is classified as a human antagonist, endowed with intellectual equipment and limitations like our own, making it possible to "play games" with him, though the games may be deadly serious and even lethal. Bosses, opponents in sports, labor unions, rival political interest groups or political parties, adversaries in legal actions, and enemies in war are all usually categorized in this way. These are all visible people, engaged in the tactics that their labels as "sport competitors," "unions," "the Japanese enemy," and so on connote. Enemies of the other sort bear labels that highlight the covert, inhuman, incalculable qualities that make it impossible to deal with them as fellow human beings: "communist conspiracy," nihilist, hard core criminal; or, in other ages, and places, "witch," and "pactors with the devil."

Metaphor and metonymy reinforce perceptions and emotions by providing the anxious person with ground for believing that all other right-minded people see and feel as he does.

Notice, however, that it is only through language (names and other signs) that such nonvisible enemies are known and perceived. By definition they act invisibly. Linguistic reference does evoke a "reality" that is not phenomenologically different from any other reality.

The Linguistic Generation of Assumptions

Some linguistic forms generate beliefs that are not criticized or verified because they are not consciously identified as part of the cognitive structure; they are simply taken for granted. Such beliefs and perceptions, moreover, are usually of key importance. In politics they deal with such matters as whether a governmental program is effective, who is responsible for its success or failure, and the salience of a particular course of action, while ignoring alternative possibilities.

Consider some common examples. Campaigns urging car owners to drive safely, whether sponsored by a government agency or a trade association, focus attention upon the driver as the cause of accidents: upon his negligent or risky habits and his failure to keep his car in prime working order. In the degree that the public is influenced by these campaigns, attention is diverted from information suggesting that automobile accidents are inevitable regardless of driver habits, that the biological and psychological characteristics of human beings are simply not adequate to cope with every unexpected circumstance that occurs on the road. Faulty design and engineering make them "unsafe at any speed." More importantly,

high horsepower, high speed limits, and dangerous hills and corners create situations with which the human brain and nervous system cannot be counted on to cope every time no matter how careful the driver or how sound the car's mechanism. Whether or not the "drive safely" campaign makes drivers more careful, it creates a misperception about what the problem is and who is responsible for it, for the focus upon the sinning driver takes for granted much that needs critical analysis, and does so without controversy or inner doubt; for who can question the virtue of safe driving? This misperception promotes the profitability of car manufacturing and the political potency of the highway lobby, while encouraging public criticism of the driver who has an accident and creating self-doubt and guilt in drivers.

Vivid metaphors, sometimes including impressive statistics respecting actual or hypothetical events, often create benchmarks that shape popular judgments of the success or failure of specific programs. An announcement that the government plans to reduce unemployment to the 4.8 percent level within a year or to hold an expected increase below the 5.8 percent level creates a benchmark of success against which future trends will be evaluated. Attention focuses upon the meeting of the publicized goal, rather than upon the 5- million-odd people who are still without jobs or upon the significant increase in joblessness. Such a cognition even more completely takes for granted the institutional arrangements that make it probable that there will consistently be 4 to 5 million people unable to find work. These conditions are uncritically assumed to the degree that the government announcement is accepted as defining the situation.

The linguistic form more effectively evokes such perceptions when the latter coincide with hopes, fears, or beliefs that serve a function for the personality, and the regime naturally (though perhaps unconsciously) frames such announcements so as to reinforce what large numbers of people want to believe but have trouble convincing themselves is true in the light of conspicuous counterevidence.

These examples involve incremental change in policy or in policy effects. Marginal change frequently structures spectators' minds so that they overlook whatever underlies the increments and therefore what is most significant about a political situation. To publicize incremental changes in policy or in well-being is to establish categories that mask the institutional context in which the problem is grounded. This form of structuring of a problem always produces symbolic or token gestures; for both public officials and the public who are attentive to the increments perceive these as the core of the issue while remaining largely oblivious to whatever problems underlie the increments and to their structural setting. A fractional decrease in unemployment masks millions who are still out of work. Each symbolic gesture further reinforces the categorization scheme and the associated definition of the situation.

The Linguistic Reconstruction of Facts

Political facts that disturb people and produce conflict are frequently reconstructed so that they conform to general beliefs about what should be happening. Harold Garfinkel has given us an admirable analysis of the employment of this linguistic device by juries, showing that jurors reach agreement, when they do, by choosing to define what

is fact, what is bias and what is relevant to the issue in such a way as to make their decision conform to prevalent social norms. The accepted norm, that is to say, defines the facts and their interpretation. As Garfinkel puts it, jurors decide

> between what is put on and what is truth...what is calculated and said by design; what is an issue and what was decided; between what is still an issue compared with what is irrelevant and will not be brought up again except by a person who has an axe to grind; between what is mere personal opinion and what any right-thinking person would have to agree to....The decisions as to what 'actually happened' provide jurors the grounds that they use in inferring the social support that they feel they are entitled to receive for the veredict they choose.[13]

Analysis of any instance of the resolution of political conflict through agreement upon an action and a verbal formula justifying it reveals the same process of reconstruction of facts through such language forms as ambiguity, highlighting of some aspects of the situation and concealment of others, substitution of a part of it for the whole, and the subtle evocation of desired perceptions. Ever since it was established, the Federal Communications Commission has given paramount weight in choosing among competing license applicants to the financial resources available to the applicant. The consequence of this policy has been that wealthy individuals and successful corporations easily make a persuasive case, while people of moderate means, including minorities, dissenters, and radicals, are often rejected. The commission's justification is that radio listeners and television viewers will be hurt if the licensee uses poor equipment or goes bankrupt; the weighing of comparative financial resources therefore promotes "the public interest, convenience, or necessity," as required by the Communications

Act of 1934.[17] Obviously, paramount weight to a more equal representation on the air of political perspectives could be justified on the same ground. The FCC chooses among alternative possibilities regarding what is an issue, what is mere opinion, what any right-thinking person would have to agree to, and what will actually happen, just as jurors do. The majority of FCC appointees come from business backgrounds in which overriding concern with financing is taken for granted as right-thinking. Their official position, the reconstruction of their reasoning in terms of the ambiguous statutory formula, and the remoteness of the detailed issues from public attention allay doubts in public opinion and in the commissioners' minds. It is not that jurors, commissioners, or the interested public simply forget or deny the issues that are obscured in the reconstruction. The reconstruction helps interested persons to accept facts and interpretations of them that engender qualms and so to live with the decision. The ambiguity of the reconstructed set of issues enables each interested group to read into it whatever interpretation suits its particular purposes, while at the same time proclaiming to the less interested the welcome news that the parties concerned have reached an agreement.

Such implicit but unrecognized contradictions in official rhetoric constantly justify governmental actions that would be strongly resisted if their consequences were explicitly stated. Vagrancy laws, for example, were initially enacted at a time when the breakdown of serfdom had depleted the supply of cheap labor available to landowners.[14] Even then it was apparently easier for people to live with the view that vagrants were potential troublemakers who needed control than with an explicit

recognition that the criminal justice system was assuring employers a docile and low-wage labor supply. Today such laws and their arbitrary enforcement by local sheriffs still help control dissenters and force them to take the work that is offered, accomplishing a "publicly unmentionable goal"[15] by focusing upon a popular one: control of crime. As is usually true in such instances, the conventional official justification has an ambiguous basis in fact. People without means of support may well violate the law if they are worried or desperate. The unrecognized issues are whether the many who have not violated the law should therefore be penalized and whether the appropriate remedy for those who have is prison or forced labor on terms free workers will not accept. The definition of the issue justifies these consequences, not by denying them, but by labeling the offender a troublemaker and criminal and so allowing the general public, employers, and law enforcement officers to live with their qualms.

By reconstructing facts and so providing new premises for reasoning, this form of political language inevitably serves the interests of the dominant group,[16] for people who do not identify with those interests are unlikely to be appointed or elected to policy-making positions, and the public is socialized from infancy to identify dominant interests with morality. Though there are always dissenters and revolutionaries, their various ideologies and interests very rarely coalesce to create a significant political force, let alone a dominant one. The accepted categories of speech and of thought therefore routinely define the economically successful and the politically powerful as meritorious and the unsuccessful and politically deviant as mentally or morally inadequate. For the

same reason policies that serve the interests of the influential come to be ordinarily categorized as routine and equitable outcomes of duly established governmental processes. Metaphor and syntax mask the amenability of these processes to unconscious (or conscious) manipulation in line with private advantage.

In marshalling public acceptance for policies, stress upon established governmental routines is critical, for these routines (due process of law) are highly flexible in the motivations and outcomes they allow, but highly confining in the perceptions they engender. Motivations and outcomes may be self-serving, but their origin in elections, legislation, and judicial proceedings transmutes them into the public will. Even when authorities make anxious concessions to protesters who deliberately violate legal processes, they make every effort to define their actions as routine responses. In making concessions to disorders in the ghettos officials always deny that they are yielding to violence, and the vehemence of the denials is in direct proportion to their ambivalent recognition that that is precisely what they are doing.

Perhaps the most common form of reconstruction of facts through language occurs through the ready assimilation into a clear or ideal typification of cases that are doubtful or different. Well-authenticated and widely publicized instances of fraud by welfare recipients make it easy to assimilate the two categories, evoking the perception that welfare recipients are suspect until they prove themselves bona fide. One study of beliefs about welfare recipients found that

> respondents in the study cited persons on relief more frequently than they mentioned any other category of people when they were asked to name persons who got more than they deserved. Approximately one third of the respondents in each class spontaneously

> mentioned mothers on relief, men on welfare, etc., as getting more than they deserved. And respondents from the lower-middle and laboring classes were more likely to complain of people on welfare than about the obviously wealthy people getting more than they deserve.[17]

Clearly, categorization does not simply create perceptions or misperceptions of others who are socially remote; it also influences perceptions of others who are close by. In this way, the name for a category shapes beliefs and public policy, reconstructing the unique qualities of individual people, of social problems, or of policies into compelling stereotypes.

Summary

The governmental process entails a great deal of talk and writing, whatever else it entails. Much political language is informal, and some of it is official. In either case its linguistic categorizations shape perceptions and feelings about problematic and controversial public issues, reflecting and playing upon the ambivalence and changing perspectives of all who are involved.

Categorization can engender cognitions that are dogmatic or tentative; perceptions of inhuman enemies or of adversaries that can best be handled through the seeking out of dissonant information; sensations that are perceived as factual propositions; beliefs that are unconsciously taken for granted; and facts that are reconstructed into different facts. Such evocations follow consistent rules of cognitive structuring, only some of which we can specify. They engender similar patterns of perception and similar tactics in recurring political situations.

NOTES

[1]David Pears, Ludwig Wittgenstein (New York: Viking, 1970), pp. 149-178.

[2]Noam Chomsky, Cartesian Linguistics (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 123-131.

[3]M. Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p. 183.

[4]Chomsky, op. cit., p. 72.

[5]Murray Edelman, "Language and Social Problems," Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper 207-74 (Madison: University of Wisconsin, Institute for Research on Poverty, 1974).

[6]Leon Festinger et al., When Prophecy Fails (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

[7]Alfred Schutz, "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action," Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 14 (September 1953): 10.

[8]Robert E. Lane and David Sears, Public Opinion (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1964).

[9]U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Work in America (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1972).

[10]Peter Sperlich, Conflict and Harmony in Human Affairs: A Study of Cross-Pressures and Political Behavior (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1971).

[11]Reported in American Friends Service Committee, Struggle for Justice (New York: Hill and Wang, 1971), p. 155.

[12]Theodore R. Sarbin, The Myth of the Criminal Type (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University, Center for Advanced Studies, 1969). Quoted in American Friends Service Committee, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

[13]Harold Garfinkel, Studies in Ethnomethodology (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), pp. 106-107.

[14]American Friends Service Committee, op. cit., p. 40.

[15]The phrase is from the book cited in note 13.

[16]Within a revolutionary movement it of course serves the interests of its leadership, for the same reason.

[17]Melvin J. Lerner, "All the World Loathes a Loser," Psychology Today 5 (June 1971): 66.